Policy takes centre stage; Vote 2019 French language debate

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Body

Federal political leaders tussled over deficits, their strategies for climate action and Indigenous issues in the final election debate, an event marked by deeper policy discussions and fewer chaotic insults than their matchup just days earlier.

Still, there were sharp exchanges in Thursday's French debate over economic vision, immigration and a possible deal to let SNC-Lavalin avoid criminal prosecution - the very issue at the heart of the controversy that cost Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau two cabinet ministers earlier this year.

In the debate's first round, which focused on "energy and the environment," each leader outlined his or her position on climate change and the environment. Green Party Leader Elizabeth May called for an end to new oil pipelines and Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer and Maxime Bernier, of the People's Party of Canada, defended their respective positions against the federal minimum price on carbon emissions.

Bernier questioned the widely accepted science that climate change is caused by human activity.

He stated the "emergency" preoccupying the other leaders "doesn't exist."

Trudeau wheeled on Yves-François Blanchet, leader of the Bloc Québécois, a signal of the party's rising fortunes in the province where the Liberals hope to gain seats.

The Liberal leader dismissed Blanchet's proposal to rejig the carbon price so provinces that emit more than average are taxed and the others receive the revenues, as something the Bloc could never accomplish because it can't win power in Ottawa.

Instead, he said it will take a "real plan" with a Liberal government "filled with Quebecers" to prevent Conservative premiers in Alberta and Ontario, backed by "oil barons," from derailing Canada's climate action.

The format of Thursday's featured rapid-fire questions for each leader and three-way interactions between the leaders that made the event feel less frenetic than the chaotic free-for-all of the English debate earlier in the week.

By the time the two-hour debate wrapped up, no single leader had won the night but it didn't seem either that any of them had fumbled badly.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, the standout of Monday's English debate, was less of a presence even as he tried to resurrect some of his choice lines. He tried to reprise a version of his big line from the English debate, when he labelled Trudeau and Scheer "Mr. Delay and Mr. Deny," during a discussion about whether the leaders would support an oil pipeline that crosses Quebec.

"This is Mr. Pipeline, Mr. Pipeline and Mr. Pipeline," he said, pointing to Scheer, Trudeau and Bernier. "Me, I'm Mr. Jagmeet Singh and I will never impose a pipeline .... That's clear."

Blanchet found himself fending off critiques of his party's policies and its ultimate goal. He came under fire for leading a party that only runs candidates in Quebec, and therefore can't form government. The Bloc leader pushed back against his opponents' assertions that voting for the Bloc will only help the Liberals or Conservatives.

"A vote for the Bloc is voting for Quebec, because we're going into a parliament. It's a democracy," Blanchet said.

Moments later, Singh shot back that "Quebec is a diversity of voices ... You don't have a monopoly on Quebec."

Scheer also zeroed in on Blanchet, accusing him of harbouring his "real intention" to "reanimate the separatist movement" the morning after the election.

Meanwhile, Bill 21, Quebec's controversial law on secularism that has been a hot-button issue throughout the campaign, did not come up until late in the debate. As the leaders rehashed their positions on the prospect of federal intervention in a court case being against the law, May butted in to lament how so much of the discussion during the election has been consumed by this provincial law.

"I hope that Quebec, as a nation, remains an inclusive society. I think that's a question for Quebecers," May said, calling for a wider discussion of different regions and the crisis of climate change.

The leaders also tangled over their economic visions and the impact on the deficit required to pay for it.

Trudeau defended his government's record in the face of challenges from Bernier and Scheer that the deficit, projected to rise further if the Liberals are re-elected, puts the country's finances at risk in the event of an economic downturn.

"This is a Conservative argument. We've heard it many times. We heard it for 10 years under Mr. Harper and you were both part of that party," Trudeau said, referring to Bernier's past as a Conservative cabinet minister.

"We saw cuts. We saw tax cuts for the richest Canadians, underinvestment in infrastructure, in seniors, in our young people and they didn't deliver economic growth," Trudeau said.

Scheer brushed aside Trudeau's criticism of the Harper-era government. "Too many lies in this discourse. I don't have time to answer all of them," said Scheer, one of several occasions when he challenged Trudeau's truthfulness.

As Scheer continued his criticism, Trudeau fired back. He noted that the Conservatives are the last of the parties to release a platform, with less than two weeks to go before the Oct. 21 vote.

"Where are your numbers? We haven't seen your numbers," Trudeau said.

Bernier played the role of Grinch at times. While other leaders pledged support for high-speed rail or more aid for seniors, Bernier was blunt: "The other leaders are behaving as if there is no deficit .... I'm not going to make promises I can't keep," he said.

There was little common ground among the leaders on the question of whether SNC-Lavalin should get a deferred prosecution agreement that would let it avoid a criminal prosecution.

Trudeau said the framework for such agreements is common across Europe. "This is a way to protect workers when there is corporate malfeasance. It is a system that works," he said, adding that the decision belongs to the attorney general

"We will respect that decision when it is taken," he said.

Scheer fired back that Trudeau "tried to undermine our independent judicial system ... There's only one job that the prime minister wanted to save and that is his own."

Trudeau also came under fire for the government's decision, during the election period, to appeal a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal order to compensate thousands of First Nations children and their parents who were harmed in a children's services system that was deemed to be chronically underfunded.

Trudeau tried to fend off criticism from May and Singh on the ruling, and insisted he agrees with the tribunal decision and will work to compensate families after the election "in the right way."

May rejected Trudeau's position, calling the appeal "a real scandal."

All leaders voiced support to redraw Canada's laws on assisted dying after a Quebec court ruled that the existing law ruling too restrictive and unconstitutional.

The issue was raised by a woman who says she is suffering from multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis and can no longer walk.

"My answer is yes ... The options are too limited. Dignity is being denied," Singh said. "I want to give you more power, more autonomy to die with dignity.

Trudeau said a Liberal government would "relax" the law in the next six months.

The debate, the last, was an important venue for leaders to reach a large audience ahead of Thanksgiving weekend, when advance polls open. Critically, the debate was a key opportunity to reach voters in Quebec, where 78 seats are up for grabs, all vital to the party that hopes to form the next government.

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